Part I

Introduction

1 Transnational communities and governance

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The dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, as coined originally by Ferdinand Tönnies, has profoundly shaped the use of the concept of "community" in the social sciences (Tönnies 2002 [1897]). As shown by Renate Mayntz in this volume, the term "community," when used alone and not qualified, still tends to suggest close-knit if not primary groups with rich emotional ties. It also conjures up geography and bounded space, local connectedness and physical proximity.

As such, the concept of community often stands in an awkward position in the study of contemporary, differentiated, and individualist societies. It has been mobilized descriptively to suggest the resilience of certain traditional ties, even in the context of rapid individualization and differentiation (Park and Burgess 1921; Park 1952). It has also been used normatively to argue for the need to preserve such forms of close-knit social organization in the face of progressive social *anomie* and disintegration (Bellah *et al.* 1985; Putnam 2000). On the whole, however, the decline of community (*Gemeinschaft*) has tended to be contrasted with the progress of *Gesellschaft* – understood as an association of individual and differentiated members coming together more or less permanently, mostly to serve their own interests. In contemporary literature, an urge to reconcile the term "community" with the evolution of our world – including the progress of *Gesellschaft* as a dominant form of social organization more or less everywhere – is palpable. This urge often manifests itself in the use of the term in a qualified fashion – as in "communities of limited liability" (Janowitz 1952), "communities of interest," "epistemic communities," or "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998; Haas 1992a, 1992b; see also Mayntz in this volume).

Exploring the notion of community

We propose that there may be a need to go one step further and to question altogether the stark dichotomy and evolutionary polarity theorized by

Tönnies. In fact, we already find support for this proposition in the work of some of Tönnies's best known contemporaries.

Moving beyond dichotomies . . .

In a review of Tönnies' book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tönnies 2002 [1897]), Emile Durkheim made it clear that he did not follow the logic advocated by the author to its conclusion. He stopped short, in particular, of systematically opposing modern society and a sense of community. Durkheim's argument was as follows:

> I believe that the life of large social aggregates is entirely as natural as that of small aggregates . . . Beyond purely individual movements, there is in our contemporary societies a genuinely collective activity that is as natural as that of smaller societies of former times. It is different, to be sure; it is of a different sort but between these two species of the same kind, as different as they might be, there is no difference in nature. (Durkheim 1889: 8)[1]

In his own work, Durkheim contrasted societies regulated by "mechanical solidarity" on the one hand and those characterized by what he called "organic solidarity" on the other (Durkheim 1984 [1893]). The latter type of societies reflected the progress of differentiation and individualization, as well as organic complementarities symbolized by an intense division of labor. Still, according to Durkheim, even in the most modern of our societies the social link normally should not disappear. That is, it could, but in that case we would be on the way towards social pathology – characterized in particular by *anomie* and revealed by increasing rates of suicide (Durkheim 1997 [1897]). The social link, the collective consciousness, the totem that brought group or society members together was naturally bound to change its form in those societies. Its profound nature and function, however, essentially remained unchanged. As Durkheim argued:

> no society can exist that does not feel the need at regular intervals to sustain and reaffirm the collective feelings and ideas that constitute its unity and personality. (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 322)

A complete reading of the work of Durkheim thus suggests the persistence of community in the midst of society, not as an archaic remnant but as a reinvented and adapted form of social connection.

If we look closely, we find that Max Weber reached similar conclusions, also taking his distance, as it were, from Tönnies's strong dichotomy. Weber

contrasted communal social relations and associative ones. A social relationship he called "communal" (*Vergemeinschaftung*) "if and so far as the orientation of social action is based on a subjective feeling of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together." In contrast, he labeled "associative" (*Vergesellschaftung*) those relationships where "the orientation of social action rests on a rationally motivated adjustment of interests or a similarly motivated agreement, whether the basis of rational judgment be absolute values or reasons of expediency" (Weber 1978: 40). Weber's level of analysis was the relationship and not society as a whole. This allowed him to bypass the evolutionary polarity proposed by Tönnies. This level of analysis made it possible to acknowledge and allow for the permanent coexistence – to different degrees and in different forms, naturally – of a sense of community and associative differentiation. According to Weber,

> [t]he great majority of social relationships has this characteristic [communal] to some degree, while being at the same time to some degree determined by associative factors. . . . Every social relationship that goes beyond the pursuit of immediate common ends, which hence lasts for long periods, involves relatively permanent social relationships between the same persons and these cannot be exclusively confined to the technically necessary activities. (Weber 1978: 41)

What we can draw from this is that any social aggregate coming together around a common end, objective, or project for a certain period of time could eventually come to exhibit a sense of community. This would naturally vary in degree, intensity, and forms of expression. Weber provides us with further tools to recognize community when we see it. The simple existence, he tells us, of a common situation, common modes of behavior, or a common feeling is not enough to allow us to talk of community. A communal relationship implies, first of all, a relationship. This means that individuals in a similar situation or predicament should come to do more than simply coexist. They should engage with each other and reciprocally around that situation or predicament. The social relationship that emerges in the process can become "communal" if this reciprocal engagement generates "feelings of belonging together" (Weber 1978: 42).

Georg Simmel proposed a slightly different but compatible approach to the issue, also distancing himself somewhat from the strong dichotomy suggested by Tönnies. Simmel saw the progress of individualization as coming together with a transformation (and not the disappearance) of social bonds. Individual differentiation came together, in fact, with an opening up of narrow social circles and with the emergence of new forms of social belonging. In reality, individualization opened up the possibility of and created the need for

belonging to a multiplicity of more or less interconnected social groups or communities. In the words of Simmel,

> differentiation and individualization loosen the bond of the individual with those who are most near in order to weave in its place a new one – both real and ideal – with those who are more distant. (Simmel 1971: 256)

The use of a counterexample allows him to clarify this argument further:

> The insularity of the caste [in India] – maintained by an internal uniformity no less strict than its exclusion of outsiders – seems to inhibit the development of what one has to call a more universal humanity, which is what makes relationships between racial aliens possible. (Simmel 1971: 256)

In other words, social links, group belonging, and community feeling do not disappear with the progress of differentiation and individualization – far from it. The meaning and form associated with these notions is certainly bound to change in the process. But, in the event, we might even witness an intensification of the possibilities for social belonging and hence a multiplication of community forms.

Norbert Elias makes a different and quite interesting contribution to this discussion (Elias 1974). He also moves away from the stark dichotomy theorized by Tönnies, while calling for a recontextualization of the study of communities. The development and transformation of communities, he argues, cannot be understood in isolation from the development of society as a whole, particularly in relation to state formation. Communities exist, Elias tells us, in less or more differentiated societies alike but their features and structures vary markedly, depending on the degree of differentiation of the society. In more differentiated societies, communities tend to be less differentiated. The process is the following. As societies become more complex and differentiated, many of the prerogatives and decision-making powers traditionally exercised at the community level move upwards and are taken up at higher levels of integration (that is, at the level of the region or of the nation-state). In Elias's own words: "The scope and differentiation of functions at the community level decreases as those at other levels of integration [national in particular, *authors' comment*] increase" (Elias 1974: xxxi–xxxii).

. . . to a focus on process

These types of contingency perspectives on communities turn our attention to dynamics and processes. Seen from this angle, communities are no longer static,

essentialist structures. They are fluid, relational constructs, constantly on the move and in process. We should consider, rather than communities, processes of community formation, maintenance, decline, and even disintegration.

Weber has underscored the importance of "time" in community-building – a "time" that could be reduced to more or less "long periods," but did not suggest eternity. According to Weber, social aggregates coming together around common ends, objectives, projects, or identity-building can potentially become communities – and one of the conditions for this is their inscription in time (Weber 1978: 40–43). Community-building and maintenance are very much processes set in time. Weber did not take the next step, but one can easily extend the argument to consider community decline or disintegration. A community that has been built up and sustained over time could certainly become threatened, weakened, or even destroyed, too, under certain conditions and pressures. Hence, any kind of community should be understood as a time-bound entity and construction, and not as a necessary, permanent, timeless, or essential collective.

Simmel provides a slightly different perspective on this question of temporality. In less differentiated societies, community-belonging has a tendency to be quite stable and limited to a small number of proximate groups that the individual, on the whole, does not "choose." In a differentiated and individualized society, every single one of us enjoys much greater freedom to associate with or, on the contrary, to leave or dissociate from different social circles or communities. Hence, individual involvement in particular communities could turn out to be only temporary – naturally with a great deal of variation. Morris Janowitz (1952) comes up with a vivid image of what this implies. He coins the term "community of limited liability" to describe the temporal inscription of community involvement and belonging. The notion of "community of liability"

> emphasizes that in a highly mobile society, people may participate extensively in local institutions and develop community attachments, yet be prepared to leave those communities if local conditions fail to satisfy immediate needs or aspirations. (Suttles 1972: 48)

Janowitz originally coined this term to describe the partial and temporally bound involvement of individuals in local communities. However, the notion can apply more broadly to communities in general, even when they are not associated with local territory or physical proximity. According to Janowitz, the notion of "community of limited liability" also suggested the possibility that members were differentially involved and invested at any point in time.

A community did not imply, nor did it require, the same type of intense involvement on the part of all its members. In fact, a community could even survive with only a small minority of "active custodians." The rest of the membership could be connected in a more passive manner (Janowitz 1952; Suttles 1972: 9).

The contingency perspective can be taken one step further. We can think of communities as being actively constructed and shaped over time by members or individuals involved in one way or another. The web of multiple group affiliations, as described by Simmel (1955 [1908]), suggests a multiplicity of latent identities that can all generate community mobilization. Out of their situated interactions with many different "others," people select and give priority to certain relations and connections. Over time, naturally, we should not forget that orders of priority may change. Hence, a particular individual may give priority through time to different relations and connections. If reciprocated, the orientation to particular relations can become the foundation of community construction. Processes of community construction imply, in turn, the stabilization of collective identities. These collective identities, at any point in time, unite but also differentiate a given member set. The construction of communities hence also implies in parallel the setting up and structuration of social boundaries. Exclusion and separation are the other face of community inclusion and belonging.

The notion of social boundaries is an old one in sociology, at the core of the classical contributions of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. Social boundaries are "called into being by the exigencies of social interaction" and become established as "communities interact in some ways or others with entities from which they are, or wish to be distinguished" (Cohen 1985: 12). The collective identity of a community thus becomes constituted through the dialectical interplay of processes of internal but also external definition (Jenkins 1996; Lamont and Molnár 2002). Simmel went a step further in the exploration of the notion of social boundaries when he placed the individual at the center of multiple group affiliations. Boundary-making and boundary-spanning activities should be conceived, then, as happening in parallel, across and between a multiplicity of communities. This obviously generates significant complexity and fluidity, and calls for a focus on dynamics and processes.

The symbolic construction of community

Simmel's argument that differentiation and individualization mean both a weakening of local links and a greater likelihood of community bonds at a

distance points us towards the symbolic dimension of communities. This symbolic construction is attributable both to the members of those communities and to those standing outside, all the more as they exchange and interact. Clifford Geertz defined man as "an animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun" (1975: 5). For a number of contemporary social anthropologists and sociologists, communities are best understood as being progressively turned or woven into symbolic constructs. As such, a community becomes for individual members "a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity" (Cohen 1985: 118).

The notion of symbolic construction makes communities conceivable even in the absence of direct and regular contact or interaction. Benedict Anderson argued as much when he explored the emergence of nations as "imagined communities" (Anderson 2006). In his words:

> A community is imagined if its members will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson 2006: 6)

Anderson describes the emergence of nation-states as reflecting the symbolic construction of a unique type of political community. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the nation as a community developed out of the confluence and convergence of different historical forces. The nation-state emerged progressively as an imagined community bounded by well-defined borders and acting as a sovereign entity in – at least theoretical – independence of others. The development of capitalism combined with the emergence of publishing to allow for the emergence of those imagined communities. Nation-states as imagined communities were then shaped in distinctive ways by social groups in different parts of the world. Local languages often played an important if not determinant role in the mobilization of a perceived common identity in those young nations. Once it had been established, the nation as an imagined community attained the character of a model. It was then diffused, applied, merged, and fused, across the world, with different political and ideological frames.

While the nation as an imagined community has in many respects unique features, it nevertheless shares its symbolic character with many other types of communities. Benedict Anderson acknowledges as much when he proposes that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (Anderson 2006: 6). All communities thus could be envisioned and redefined as "imagined communities." What makes the nation unique and distinct as a community is that symbolic

construction there largely transcends the social links connecting members. Furthermore, the success of the nation and associated nation-state as a model is quite unparalleled. This model has diffused and institutionalized successfully across the world as a core imagined political and social community.

Imagined communities are collective attractors but they are also polarizing entities. The imagined community is constituted as much through shared belonging and meaning inside as through differentiation and separation from the outside. Social anthropologist Anthony Cohen summarizes this quite well when he claims that

> [t]he quintessential referent of community is that its members make, or believe they make, a similar sense of things either generally or with respect to specific and significant interests, and, further, that they think that that sense may differ from one made elsewhere. (Cohen 1985: 16)

This should not be taken to mean that imagined communities are perfectly homogeneous and tightly bounded spheres, however. In fact, imagined communities do not necessarily suggest the same things for all their members. Their very nature as "webs of significance" or "webs of meaning" leaves room for variation. Even though a sense of belonging can be broadly shared, the particular meaning associated with the community, as well as the understanding of community boundaries, can vary between members. While communities are constituted by culture and function as culture, they also generate and define "tool kits" that members – or for that matter non-members – can use to strategize upon the further development and symbolic constitution of those communities (Swidler 1986). An understanding of communities as being at the same time relational, social, and symbolic constructs allows us to conceive of communities as being differentially homogeneous with respect to shared meanings. Some communities can be relatively uniform and exhibit "a common way of thinking, feeling and believing" (Kluckhohn 1962: 25). Differentiated societies might be populated, on the other hand, by increasing numbers of internally more pluralist communities, consisting of a *mélange* or variety of ways of thinking, feeling, and believing that different members attach to the community.

Of course, there are limits to such aggregation. The community can be a container of diversities – but within bounds. At the same time as the community can accommodate diversities it also keeps them within limits. In the words of Cohen:

> The triumph of community is to so contain this variety that its inherent discordance does not subvert the apparent coherence which is expressed by its boundaries. If the members of a community come to feel that they have less in common with each other

than they have with the members of some other community, clearly, the boundaries have become anomalous and the integrity of the "community" they enclose has been severely impugned. (Cohen 1985: 20)

Taking stock – what does it take to talk of "community"?

This exploration of classical and more current debates around the notion of community allows us to draw up a number of propositions. The progress of differentiation and individualization associated with modern and postmodern societies neither destroys nor threatens the possibility of community feeling. Traditional communities can survive even if they come to be transformed. But what is more interesting is the increasing possibility for different forms of community-building. In more differentiated and individualized societies, individuals have the possibility to enter into and belong to a multiplicity of more or less open, more or less interconnected, more or less distant communities. These communities reflect and build upon social interactions but they are also symbolic constructions. A rethinking of community along the lines proposed here makes it possible to think of community-building even in the absence of local territory and physical proximity (see also Mayntz in this volume). It shows, furthermore, that an imagined community, once established, is conceivable even in the absence of much direct and regular interaction or social interconnection.

Hence, we can propose here that territory and physical proximity, not to mention direct interaction, are neither necessary nor defining components of the concept of community. Territory, physical proximity, and direct interaction define one particular form – important, but only one amongst others – in which a sense of community has expressed itself and expresses itself in human history. We suggest moving away from rigid evolutionary frames and from a picture of social transformation that follows a linear sense of time – where, for example, tightly knit and localized communities would precede in time distant, loosely tied, and more differentiated communities. Only then can we understand and explain the existence, as early as the Middle Ages, of communities that had little to do with a traditional sense of *Gemeinschaft*. Anderson describes what he calls "classical" or "pre-national" communities, which existed and thrived in spite of physical distance, "virtuality," absence of common territory, and even lack of direct interaction, and this well before the kind of technologies we are familiar with today. The Roman Catholic Church, its associated "European" universities, and the transregional commercial